

Cambridge University Press

0521583004 - The Grammar of Meaning: Normativity and Semantic Discourse

Mark Norris Lance and John O'Leary-Hawthorne

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

### 1.1 PHILOSOPHICAL ACCOUNTS OF MEANING

Daniel Dennett once invited us to consider super-Martians who were highly advanced scientifically yet lacked all intentional concepts.<sup>1</sup> They spoke the language of austere physics and were capable of perceiving and describing the world at the micro-level. If such beings could accurately report happenings in their environment, make predictions, and generally live out their lives wholly within the scientific image, what would they be missing, Dennett wondered, by virtue of lacking intentional concepts? Dennett's answer was that they would miss out on various higher-level patterns, describable by way of mentalistic and semantic vocabulary. Such patterns are available to us by virtue of our understanding of such vocabulary, and we rely inescapably on it.

Such an answer, in outline, is fairly standard today.<sup>2</sup> That is, it is fair to say that the general consensus in modern philosophy is that semantic talk – to focus on the species of concern to us – is descriptive of some sort of high-level pattern. There is, to be sure, a fair range of disagreement as to what sort of pattern it is. For some (Field, Devitt) it is a pattern of causal relations between humans, their language, and macroscopic objects; for others (Putnam at one point, Lycan) it is purely the functional organization of individual thought, while various philosophers extend this individualism to include either relations to external objects (Putnam at another point), or relations among the people in one's society (Burge, perhaps Sellars, and Putnam at yet a third point). Finally, there are those who take seman-

<sup>1</sup> "True Believers" in *The Intentional Stance*.

<sup>2</sup> We don't mean to suggest that Dennett invented this general form of answer which has roots not only in the earlier functionalists, but even in some of the classical rationalists, but Dennett's thought experiment serves to bring the issue into an especially sharp focus.

Cambridge University Press

0521583004 - The Grammar of Meaning: Normativity and Semantic Discourse

Mark Norris Lance and John O'Leary-Hawthorne

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The grammar of meaning*

tic discourse to involve the description, in the first instance, of patterns of behavior within a society one is considering from the outside. (Quine and Davidson are the primary examples here.)

What all these views have in common is the idea that the claims made using semantic concepts purport to *describe*. Semantic descriptions are at a radically different ontological level than are the descriptive claims of basic science, but the fundamental sort of speech act involved in ascribing meaning to a sentence, for example, is the same as that involved in characterizing the properties of a metal. If we conceive of grammatical categories as designed to sort elements of language into classes, each of whose members call for the same broad type of semantic treatment, we can say that the received view is that the grammar of meaning claims is descriptive.

It is our purpose in what follows to deny this consensus. We do think the austere physicalism of the super-Martians to be impoverished, but it is not primarily the ability to describe at a higher level of organization which they lack. The reason for this is that the role of semantic discourse is not to describe anything at all. We offer, instead, a radically normative position on meaning claims. That is, we do not content ourselves with the relatively common view that part of the pattern characterized in ascribing meanings is the structure of socially accepted norms of a society. Rather, we claim that the very speech act of making a meaning claim is itself normative, that saying what something means is *prescribing*. As such, meaning claims have more in common with the claims of morality than they do with the claims of science and so ought to raise for us philosophical questions consonant with those arising in moral philosophy, rather than in the philosophy of science. In short, the grammar of meaning is normative.<sup>3</sup>

There is much to be said, both about what could be meant by such a claim and about why one might believe it. Just as important will be

<sup>3</sup> This explains, then, the somewhat odd title of our book. We must apologize, with a bit of embarrassment, that the title is not original. It was used by one of us in a paper a decade ago which made some of the points of this book and the intent was to bring to mind some remarks of Wittgenstein. In deference to this early paper, the title for this book was chosen. Only after nearly completing the present work did we discover a paper which predated all of our work and which uses the same title (namely, "Toward a Grammar of Meaning," by Dennis Stampe.) Unfortunately, so many have discussed manuscript versions of the present work, taught it in graduate courses etc., that it would breed confusion to revise the title.

Cambridge University Press

0521583004 - The Grammar of Meaning: Normativity and Semantic Discourse

Mark Norris Lance and John O'Leary-Hawthorne

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

to consider carefully what sorts of philosophical issues rise to the surface when one so conceives of meaning talk. All this is the purpose of this book, and by the end of it we hope to have offered a coherent and perhaps even persuasive philosophical account of meaning.

In all this, our goal is not to provide a theoretical characterization of the meaning of the elements of some non-semantic fragment of natural language, but to inquire after meaning itself. Are we then interested in the meaning of words only insofar as this bears on the meaning of a particular word – “meaning”? While this characterization is not altogether misleading, it would be premature to formulate our task so narrowly as to involve the semantic analysis of any particular word in natural language. It would be more accurate to say that there is a loosely defined cluster of natural language terms we wish to inquire after, but we could as well say that our goal is to investigate what meaning is, what it is to attribute a meaning, how meanings are determined, or the role and importance of meaning discourse. More importantly, we wish to tell a story which not only explicates each of these but lends some structure to this list of issues, which shows how “things hang together”<sup>4</sup> in the vicinity of meaning.

Much will depend, in such an investigation, upon one’s starting-points. Two aspects of our own deserve mention. First, as we discuss in some detail shortly, we focus our initial energy upon a characterization of the “broad pragmatics” of meaning talk. That is, we ask first what is at stake in such discourse, what its point is in our broader linguistic economy. This starting-point is chosen not because we intend a pragmatic reduction of meaning to use, or much less of correct meaning to pragmatic utility. Quite to the contrary, we wish to argue that such goals are hopeless. We do, however, insist that one cannot properly approach the epistemological and ontological questions surrounding the issue of meaning without a firm grasp of these issues of systemic pragmatics.

Our second starting-point is with the Quinean situation of the radical translator. Again, it would be easy to overestimate the strength of the underlying reason. We certainly do not intend to argue that the detached situation of the radical interpreter is paradigmatic of all

<sup>4</sup> We have in mind Sellars’s characterization of philosophy as the study of how things, in the broadest possible sense of the term, hang together, in the broadest possible sense of the term. (cf. “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man,” the first sentence.)

Cambridge University Press

0521583004 - The Grammar of Meaning: Normativity and Semantic Discourse

Mark Norris Lance and John O'Leary-Hawthorne

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The grammar of meaning*

semantic interpretation. In this case, it simply seems to us that important insights can be gained by a fresh examination of issues concerning such a situation. These insights are important enough, in our view, to warrant yet another philosophical foray into the indeterminacy of translation. We trust the reader will bear with us. She has our promise that at the least something *new* will result. Whether it is something true, convincing, or attractive is more than it would be seemly to promise at the outset.

Thus, we turn to a survey of what follows.

## 1.2 DIFFERING MOTIVATIONS

What is the point of a philosophical account of meaning? There are myriad answers that can be garnered from the literature on meaning. Sometimes, one feels that philosophical accounts of meaning are not being driven by any firm view about the point of such a project. Perhaps the feeling here is: "Well, it is a philosopher's job to analyze, and meaning discourse seems just as worthy of analysis as any other. If we can analyze it, we might as well do so; if we cannot analyze it, we might as well discover why that is so." But more often – and more admirably – there is a clearer motivation for philosophical accounts of meaning which are being offered. A brief list is useful.

(1) *Response to eliminativism* Some sorts of philosophical accounts are clearly designed to defend meaning discourse from eliminativism. To the extent that they are properly distinguished, it is doctrinal eliminativism that is usually targeted – i.e. the view that the very claims typically made using meaning discourse are false – though sometimes efforts are also made to make an ontology of meanings seem a little less problematic. Of course, there would be little point in centering philosophical energies upon eliminativism unless it were a real threat. And there are certainly some philosophers who simply dismiss eliminativisms and hence do not see a defense against them as a motivating concern. It is not uncommon to see the view advanced that it is a Mooreian fact that meaning discourse states facts about the world, that nothing could be so obvious as that meaning discourse is frequently true, or that any argument whose premises entail eliminativism will have premises that are far less obvious than the claim controverted by the conclusion. (Searle, for example, is famous for such charges.)

Cambridge University Press

0521583004 - The Grammar of Meaning: Normativity and Semantic Discourse

Mark Norris Lance and John O'Leary-Hawthorne

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

Yet there are certainly many philosophers who are in the grip of such considerations. *Prima facie*, it seems to be rather difficult to integrate meaning discourse into natural science. Owing to this, the subject-matter of meaning discourse has come to seem rather queer to some, in the way that the subject-matter of moral discourse came to seem rather queer to Mackie. As a result, the story goes, we need to establish the metaphysical credentials of meaning discourse, to put it on a firmer footing. There are various ways of trying to do this: by transcendental argument, by showing that meaning discourse is reducible to natural science after all, or perhaps by reflecting on the epistemology of meaning discourse in a way that reveals that the need to justify meaning discourse is not so pressing after all.

(2) *Meaning and metaphysics* Another common motivation is to render meaning discourse compatible with a certain metaphysical picture. One metaphysical picture that is often in play is a naturalistic one. According to such a picture, there is some important sense in which all the facts are natural facts. Meaning discourse stands as a potential problem for such a picture. It seems that the only way of dealing with it for one who holds such a picture is to defend either some sort of reductionism, or some sort of eliminativism.

Of course, there are other relevant metaphysical pictures that might motivate a concern for a philosophical account of meaning discourse. A common picture of intentionality – the aboutness that seems to be shared by mind and language – is that the aboutness of mind is somehow metaphysically prior to the aboutness of language, that the latter is derivative from the former. It would be incumbent on the proponent of such a metaphysical picture to explain meaning in terms of mind. (We need not pause here to ask what sort of explanation would justify the relevant claim of metaphysical priority.)

Another sort of metaphysical picture, one that is rather antithetical to the one just described, takes very seriously the view that we are social animals by insisting that intentionality can only arise in a social framework. (At the very least, such a picture encourages the view that mind is not metaphysically prior to language.) Again, such a picture, if embraced, will place serious demands and constraints on the theorist of meaning.

(3) *Meaning and analyticity* A very different sort of motivation for meaning discourse is to explain the putatively privileged status of certain claims – the “analytic” ones, or the ones that are “true by

Cambridge University Press

0521583004 - The Grammar of Meaning: Normativity and Semantic Discourse

Mark Norris Lance and John O'Leary-Hawthorne

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The grammar of meaning*

convention.” As Quine explains, the picture that many philosophers have had of language (though it is a picture that is becoming rather less popular) is that the meaning of certain claims guarantees their truth and hence that their truth does not depend on the world being a certain way. The claims whose truth is underwritten in this way are further, it is commonly supposed, ones whose truth can be known with *a priori* certainty by us. One who was to defend such a picture would want to develop a philosophical account of meaning according to which (a) the meaning of certain claims guaranteed their truth and (b) the meaning of those claims could be known *a priori*. Therein lies a substantial philosophical task indeed.

(4) *Meaning and the limits of skepticism* One common theme in the philosophical literature is that reflections on meaning can somehow provide a bulwark against skepticism. A source for this suspicion is inevitably to be found in the idea that analytic truths are immune to skeptical doubt, but that is not the only source. A number of philosophers have sought to contrive demonstrations against skepticism out of materials to be found in their favorite philosophical accounts of meaning. Donald Davidson, for example, while suspicious of analyticity (understood in the way described above) has argued that general skepticism is ultimately incoherent and that we can recognize this by pausing to consider how God would interpret the language of another creature. It turns out, Davidson argues, that God would be constrained to interpret the language of any possible language-user in a way that took him to have mostly true belief. We can thus rest assured, Davidson concludes, that we have mostly true beliefs. We need not pause to evaluate this argument; it is sufficient for our purposes for it to serve as a reminder of the hope of many philosophers that the philosophy of meaning might be pressed into the service of epistemology.

(5) *Meaning and the nature of metaphysics* It has been the hope of many philosophers in this century that a philosophical account of meaning can be put to work in order to elucidate the nature and limits of metaphysical inquiry. There are a few ways in which one might hope to accomplish this. First, by elucidating the distinction between disagreements of meaning and disagreements about the facts, one can better see which metaphysical issues are terminological and hence pseudo-issues and which issues are substantive. Second, one might hope to elucidate the limits of meaningful metaphysics by under-

Cambridge University Press

0521583004 - The Grammar of Meaning: Normativity and Semantic Discourse

Mark Norris Lance and John O'Leary-Hawthorne

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

standing better the line between sense and nonsense. The latter enterprise was, of course, popular among the positivists, but it remains with us in various guises.

(6) *Meaning and logic* Many look to the philosophy of meaning in order to clarify issues in the philosophy of logic. There are a number of reasons for this. Those pondering the status and legitimacy of alternative systems of logical laws have often looked to the philosophy of meaning for guidance. Thus, Dummett argues roughly as follows: entailments exist in virtue of the meaning of the related sentences. In particular, if P entails Q, there must be some feature of the meaning of P which underwrites this fact. Further, since meanings are what are learned when one learns language, the inference-generating potential of a premise cannot outstrip the potentially learnable. From this, together with reflections upon what is involved in learning language, Dummett attempts to argue for a restriction of logic to intuitionistic principles.

To cite one other example, it is commonplace to defend a deep link between modal logic and the philosophy of meaning, though this fact can be seen either as adding to the mutual clarity of both sorts of discourse or else as a sign that both are in trouble. To the extent that one feels that many deep metaphysical questions turn on issues about logical laws or the nature of necessity, one may well regard all this as a sign that the philosophy of meaning can contribute to substantive issues of metaphysics at the deepest level.

(7) *Meaning, truth, and reference* One often encounters the hope that the philosophy of meaning can clarify how language supposedly hooks on to the world by helping us to understand the two purported word-world relations that have occupied philosophers most: at the level of sentences, truth, and at the level of words, reference. One is thereby encouraged to conclude that the seemingly intractable metaphysical disputes about realism can perhaps be resolved by turning to the philosophy of meaning.

(8) *Meaning, cognitive science, and linguistics* Those who do not have the heady goals mentioned under the last few entries may justify their concern with meaning in connection with natural sciences: it may reasonably be felt that those relatively new sciences dealing with language and the mind can benefit greatly from the clarity that philosophy of meaning can provide.

Now it seems clear that the philosophy of meaning would serve an

Cambridge University Press

0521583004 - The Grammar of Meaning: Normativity and Semantic Discourse

Mark Norris Lance and John O'Leary-Hawthorne

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The grammar of meaning*

important point were any of these ambitions to be realized. It is also worth emphasizing that to the extent that one can show that some or other of these goals cannot be achieved by the philosophy of meaning, that would also be a significant philosophical achievement.

How to proceed when faced with this alarming diversity of subject-matter? While most of the topics discussed above provide reasonable motivations for thinking hard about meaning, it will be helpful to mention the hunches and questions that prompted our own work on these issues. We begin with the distinction between inferentialist and representationalist approaches to language. The representationalist takes apparent word–world relations – true of, true, refers – to provide us with the best explanatory tools for obtaining a deep understanding of how natural language works. The inferentialist, on the other hand, takes inferential relations between claims to be explanatorily most basic. Neither approach will want to lose sight altogether of the concepts heralded by the other: the representationalist hopes to give an account of good inference in terms of truth, while the inferentialist must provide a derivative account of reference and truth. Broadly speaking, our aim in writing this book was to think through an inferentialist approach to talk about meaning, in the hope that it might shed light on some items in the list of topics we have already mentioned.

Inferentialist accounts of the concept of meaning have been provided most famously by Wilfrid Sellars.<sup>5</sup> Sellars's version of inferentialism tells us that the meaning of a claim is its inferential role and that to report on the meaning of a claim is to report on its inferential role.<sup>6</sup> Yet this account struck us as fundamentally misguided in a

<sup>5</sup> Robert Brandom's recent book, *Making It Explicit*, though one whose orientation is certainly congenial to our own in significant respects, does not address the issue of meaning directly. Brandom gives an account of linguistic practice and the role of a number of central semantic concepts within this practice. Among those he considers are "is true," "refers," and various aboutness locutions. Interestingly, though, Brandom gives no explanation of the inferential or practical significance of "means that." Thus, whereas his work can be seen as a first step toward an inferentialist theory of meaning for a language, our own is an explanation of just how the concept of meaning itself functions within such a theory, and within language.

<sup>6</sup> Of course, "inferential role" here must be construed broadly. Sellars considers three sorts of "moves" in a language game, moves which together make up the role of any bit of language in that game. The first is language-entrance moves in which one moves from a nonlinguistic act or event – say observing a cow tripping over a sleeping semiotician – to



Cambridge University Press

0521583004 - The Grammar of Meaning: Normativity and Semantic Discourse

Mark Norris Lance and John O'Leary-Hawthorne

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

way that ordinary practice makes clear. Ordinary claims about synonymy do not seem, on the face of it, to pair claims of the same inferential role. Ordinary practice quite clearly regards it as legitimate to treat some claim in Jones's mouth as synonymous with a claim in Smith's even though their inferential roles differ in significant ways.

On the positive side, it struck us that a far more plausible starting-point for an account of talk about meaning would be achieved if one took meaning claims as asserting a normative propriety concerning what *ought to be* inferred from what. Working with a methodological broad brush, then, the aim of this book is to develop an account of our meaning concepts that is broadly inferentialist but which takes the normative status of meaning talk very seriously.<sup>7</sup>

A subsidiary hunch of ours was that the contemporary fashion in North America to disclaim altogether the "analytic/synthetic distinction" represented something of an excess. There seemed something right underlying that dismissal – that our Humean epistemic condition has no place for the *a priori*, robustly conceived – yet, properly understood, it seemed to us that the analytic/synthetic distinction is quite serviceable, indeed necessary.

Despite our inferentialist orientation to natural language, we never felt for a moment that metaphysical issues in general and metaphysical issues about meaning in particular could be sidestepped. While not *beginning* with straightforwardly metaphysical questions about meaning, we did wish to return to questions about whether there are meaning facts and what constitutes them in light of our investigation. Here, we sensed a different pair of excesses: while there seemed to be something eminently plausible about the naturalistic world-view, the reductive approach to meaning often taken by naturalists seemed to sort ill with meaning's normative role. We then needed to ask

a linguistic act – asserting: "Lo, a clumsy cow." The second sort of move is the language-language move from one linguistic act to another – moving from the former assertion to "Lo, a clumsy mammal." Finally, there are the language exits, by which one moves to a nonlinguistic action – moving from "I am going to help that animal up," to doing so. Only the second sort of move is an inference strictly speaking, but there are enough structural similarities in the three sorts to justify talk of "broadly construed inferential role." Also, the difference between such an approach, which is all internal to social practice, and one which is based upon language-world relations is still clear.

<sup>7</sup> This strand was first developed in our paper "From a Normative Point of View." As will become clear in the next chapter, we now take certain revisions of the account given in that paper to be in order, but the general spirit of that work is still preserved.

Cambridge University Press

0521583004 - The Grammar of Meaning: Normativity and Semantic Discourse

Mark Norris Lance and John O'Leary-Hawthorne

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The grammar of meaning*

ourselves what was worth saving in the naturalistic world-view beyond, say, a weak supervenience thesis. The answer, we felt, must have to do with issues concerning wherein lies explanatory depth.

Another excess – this time among Quine and his followers – is to be found in the view that meaning talk is not fit for truth. It struck us that a suitable minimalism about truth – one that Quine himself endorses – coupled with a suitable pragmatism, also endorsed by Quine, makes such a view radically implausible. Finally, we mention a larger concern that drove this project but which it lacks the scope to discuss at any length: the relevance of meaning talk to metaphysics in general.

The methodological issue here, concerning the extent to which considerations about meaning can and ought to do metaphysical work, is an important one for the analytic tradition. Though we deny the grand claims to the effect that philosophy of language can altogether supersede metaphysics, one might hope that any extended inquiry into meaning would shed at least some small light on grand metaphysical issues, and we think ours does. Nonetheless, we do no more than hint at these issues in this book.

## 1.3 THE GAME PLAN

Let us now offer a preliminary motivation for the central division of the book, and along the way flag some of its central themes. This section is intended to help the reader orient herself toward the material that is to come, as well as to serve as a partial sketch of our own orientation toward this difficult subject-matter. We begin with the important distinction between questions about what meaning is, and questions about the structure and function of meaning talk.

A natural question to ask oneself in connection with meaning talk is: what constitutes facts about meaning? Sometimes, this question is framed as the demand for the truth conditions of meaning discourse. Having asked the question, we may search for some reductive analysis of meaning. We may contrive some analysis that seems to have no obvious counterexamples and settle upon it, at least tentatively. Or we may fail to come upon a satisfactory analysis, and explain the failure either by appeal to limitations in our own cognitive ability or by making one of two bold metaphysical conjectures: that there are no facts about meaning, or that meaning facts are primitive.

We do not dismiss the metaphysical query that guides these analytic